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ABSTRACT

Interpreting is an example of context-bound performance in which the interpreter has a prescribed role in infinitely varied contexts. The use of interpreting to train language students in confident and competent language use in less demanding contexts contributes to the development of both interpersonal skills and the ability to switch language codes. If the instructor constructs realistic interpreting situations for students, the students are also more likely to keep current with world events. A traditional view of interpreters is that they are generally extroverted, while translators are generally introverted in personality. However, a survey of 65 translators and 35 interpreters did not find as much difference between the two groups as expected, refuting the idea that interpreting is an activity useful for only extroverted language students. The findings also suggest that just as extroverted students can benefit from tackling the challenges of translation, introverted students can benefit from being required to concentrate hard, respond quickly and spontaneously, and communicate verbally in interpreting. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE, CONTEXT AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE INTERPRETER

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Interpreting in the Undergraduate Course, 3

LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE, CONTEXT AND THE PERSONALITY OF THE INTERPRETER

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Rather than attempting to define and describe the role of interpreting in the degree course in any general way, I shall here confine myself to two aspects, first by returning briefly to the question of skills and then by touching on that of personality, insofar as it affects our perception of the interpreting process.

In the conference theme of 'oral and aural skills' we all have a clear idea of what we mean by 'oral and aural', but the precise definition of a 'skill' and, more importantly, its place and ranking in a degree course have been the subject of some debate. In furtherance of this debate I find it useful to revive an old distinction, between what I shall refer to as language performance (LP) and language knowledge (LK). If one defines LP - the act of communication - as each and every speech act or utterance, and LK as the way in which, as foreign-language learners particularly, we perceive a language, as presented to us in dictionaries, rules of grammar and syntax, it will be immediately obvious that my two categories are none other than the familiar Saussurian terms of parole and langue respectively. Here it is worth reminding ourselves that LP or parole is by nature existential (if that term does not sound altogether too quaint these days): for the first-language, native speaker, LP precedes LK, the existence of parole precedes the essence of langue. Indeed many people, no doubt the majority, use their native language very adequately for the purposes of everyday communication with their fellows without ever being conscious of its existence as a language, or certainly without reference to 'the language' in the sense in which I have defined LK, as mediated through dictionaries and grammar rules. Even where the native speaker is aware of his language, performance normally comes first.

The speaker of a foreign language will however generally work in the opposite direction, proceeding at least in the initial stages and for many for a considerable time thereafter from LK to LP. And yet our aim, surely, is to bring our students to the point where they perform in the foreign language (rather more) spontaneously, without (constant) reference to rules and norms, which in any case are at best generalisations. LK is not - or should not be - the sole determinant of LP.

For the foreign-language learner, therefore, LK as defined is a necessary though not a sufficient condition of LP - and it is performance, not just knowledge, that we are seeking to achieve when we include among our goals the skills of foreign-language comprehension or expression, whether oral or written. What we are most emphatically not seeking to produce is the

graduate who is a walking encyclopaedia of dictionary-based information but is tongue-tied when confronted with a native speaker of French, German, etc.

What is missing in the equation, given that LP requires more than LK, is quite simply context. The vital need to know the context of an utterance may be illustrated by the following example. When I switch on my radio I happen to hear someone speaking about 'the forties', though I do not know in what connection, or even to what station I am tuned. Supposing that I am acting here as interpreter, I can imagine a number of renderings into eg. French of 'the forties', but which of these is appropriate will depend entirely on context, for example:

> the forties may well be suitably rendered as les années quarante, but only if the context supports it, eg. the programme may be a review of a book entitled 'British Economic Policy since the War'.

With different contextual cues (or clues) the rendering will differ. If the context is a report on the round-the-world yacht race, then

> the forties will be conveyed by an expression containing the term par 40° de latitude (sud if the competitors are in the South Atlantic).

If however the context turns out to be North Sea oil, then the rendering will incorporate something like

> 40° latitude nord.

If again it turns out that all these hypotheses as to context are mistaken, there are other possibilities. One which will no doubt have already come to mind is simply that of age, thus:

> passé la quarantaine

for, one might imagine, a Radio Three talk on the Seven Ages of Man.

In this instance it turned out that all my projected versions were wrong. It may be noted that they do all contain some term which is the equivalent of the number forty. However not even this assumption is necessarily justified. The correct rendering turned out to be simply

> de 6 à 8 degrés (Centigrade - though in French the 'C' would be superfluous)

for I had happened on the weather forecast, just as the announcer was reporting that minimum overnight temperatures would be in the mid-forties.

Context may of course encompass a wide range of matters. Another illustration will help to make this clear, again culled from radio, whose ubiquitous presence somehow confers an aura of authenticity.[1] The speaker is a lady being interviewed on the BBC's Today programme:

> These days you can't get on a bus at the top of the street, so I usually walk to the elephant.

Two contextual clues will probably suffice: she has a South London accent; and we know, from following news and current affairs at the time of the observation, that there are problems with London Transport and with British Rail Southern Region but the tube is running. One then need only insert the capital E to indicate that she means the Elephant and Castle underground station (and then only in the written version) and all is made clear.

The intrepid Martian, on the other hand, stepping from his spacecraft well equipped for his visit at the level of LK - with all the dictionaries of English ever published stored in his personal microcomputer, with its random-access memory, plugged into his capacious brain - could be forgiven for concluding, wrongly, that the British had adopted a novel mode of transport, hitherto found mainly in India and also used, a long time ago, by a person called Hannibal. Whereas, given the context, the problem disappears.

The point of this digression is that interpreting, as practised professionally or in the language degree course, is a prime example of context-bound performance. We can and do invent many role-playing situations to enable our students to practise oral skills, but each of these has to be set up, with suitable priming, whether it be the telephone call, ordering a meal or cashing a cheque, recounting, enquiring, describing, discussing or whatever. This approach has its drawbacks, not least in that it requires considerable ingenuity and imagination on the part of the tutor and on the part of the student; and each situation or scenario is liable to remain limited in scope and constrained by the context we have imposed.

Interpreting provides a ready-made role - always the same ('You are the interpreter') yet infinitely varied. It is obvious for example that it can readily be related to area studies or options, with the political interview, the economic discussion or indeed the literary conversation. One may involve the micro- or the macro-context (as could be projected from the above example), from the identity of the participants for whom the student is to interpret and the purpose of their meeting to the most wide-ranging country-specific or world knowledge. Once the context is established, the student, provided that he has a healthy curiosity about the world and takes the trouble to read the papers,[2] can then concentrate on comprehension and expression. Given that it is the interpreter's job to convey the spirit, the intention of the original

speaker's remarks, not only the dire (that which is said) but also the vouloir dire (that which is meant), it can be seen that he, like the famous lager, reaches those parts of the audience that the other speakers cannot reach. This calls into play all the qualities of communicative competence that we would ideally wish to inculcate, at least to the extent that students, including those who are unlikely to become professional interpreters, are able to express themselves confidently and competently in situations more relaxed that that in which the interpreter habitually finds himself. Such situations are also, incidentally, less constrained by context. It is here that it is wholly appropriate to see interpreting as contributing to the development of interpersonal skills, allied to the ability to switch language codes, which puts oral competence, including competence to express oneself in one's mother tongue, into its proper perspective. A student who knows that part of his diet is liable to include - if only in simulation - being required to act as interpreter for Pierre Mauroy will be at the very least more inclined not only to keep abreast of current affairs but to take note of recent pronouncements by the French Prime Minister and to familiarise himself with the basic principles of French socialism and the long-standing issues in French politics generally. Thus context doth make cowards of us all, for, as any working interpreter will confirm, one would much rather be informed beforehand on a topic that is likely to arise at the meeting than be caught unawares. The professional interpreter's wide-ranging curiosity about the world and all that it contains is surely a model worth emulating.

This mention of one of the (supposed) qualities of the interpreter brings me to the second of my two topics, that of personality. Here, to broaden the perspective, I should like to offer quotations from three completely unrelated sources.

The first concerns a view widely held of the two professions most obviously relevant to the language graduate (together with teaching), that of the translator and that of the interpreter. It is generally believed and frequently asserted that these two occupations attract (or require) persons of different personality or temperamental disposition:

> The two professions require different personality types: translating is a more introspective, reflective occupation, whereas for interpreting one has to be an extravert, at ease in a wide variety of social situations (Steadman, 1982)
>
> No one person is likely to make a good interpreter and a good translator. The one art calls for a bold, extravert exhibitionist and the other for a cautious, introvert perfectionist (Simpkin and Jones, 1976)

Few would disagree with these generalisations and indeed the majority of professionals questioned in the course of my own research into the matter confirmed the above view. In a survey of 65 professional translators and 35 conference interpreters all employed by international organisations in Western Europe, the stereotype view of each profession in terms of personality was clearly along these lines, with the single most frequent

feature mentioned by far being that translators tend to be introverted and interpreters extraverted.[3] A small minority only of respondents doubted whether there is such a wide difference between translators and interpreters or felt that it was perhaps exaggerated.

If the stereotype view is indeed correct, it clearly has implications for our teaching. This is true whether or not we are concerned with producing future professionals (and as teachers of undergraduates such is certainly not our sole aim or even a major one) simply because it is something we must take account of if we are to use translating or interpreting as part of the learning process. There has been relatively little research on the relationship between personality and learning styles, but some of it is of interest here. One study of schoolchildren found that:

> ... children high on extraversion learn better by listening, while the introverts do better by reading (Cattell et al, 1970)

This is not on the face of it a particularly surprising observation, but it is food for thought if considered along with the research evidence about the personality of university students. Here there is some evidence of a positive correlation between degree class and moderate introversion together with a moderate level of anxiety, i.e. the somewhat introverted and anxious student is, it seems, more likely to get a good honours degree than his extravert, unanxious colleague, other things being equal. If it needs a 'cautious, introvert perfectionist' to make a good translator, then we need at the very least to be aware of this in our approach to teaching languages.

To take the question of personality a stage further, it is appropriate to consider the teacher as well as the student. The following, from a work on psychometrics, is a comment made in the context of educational assessment, though the point clearly applies to language learning:

> What is needed is ... more highly concentrated studies that attempt to account for the correlations - for example studies of the behaviour of teachers and students measuring the interaction with personality-test scores. Then it might be found that certain methods and procedures enable pupils of given personality configurations to perform well and that these methods are employed most effectively by teachers of certain personality patterns. (Kline, 1983).

This at least indicates possible directions of future research.

The claim made earlier that personality has implications for the way we teach or, more importantly, the way our students learn oral or other language skills was prefaced by the phrase 'if the stereotype view (of e.g. the professional translator and the professional interpreter) is correct ...' The

research project in which the survey of attitudes of 65 translators and 35 interpreters was conducted also investigated the personality of the respondents. With a view to discovering whether their stereotype views were confirmed by objective personality measures, each subject completed a personality inventory test, the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire (16PF), a test widely used for such purposes and devised by Raymond Cattell (see e.g. Cattell et al, 1970), one of the leading exponents, with Eysenck, of the scientific measurement of personality. Detailed results of the analysis of 16PF scores will be published elsewhere, but extracts are presented here in summary form.

It was confidently expected that the personality questionnaire would indeed confirm the stereotypes. As it turns out, the difference is much less than might be expected. On the major personality dimension of introversion v. extraversion, for example, the mean score for the 35 interpreters shows them to be somewhat more extravert than the mean for the 65 translators, but the overlap between the two samples is very substantial. A number of interpreters appear to be more introvert than the average translator and vice versa, ie. a number of translators appear more extravert than the average interpreter. Similar results are obtained on a second major dimension, that of anxiety. Some interesting differences do however emerge, in that, for example, the translators score significantly higher than the interpreters on a rudimentary test of intelligence. This result was quite unexpected and clearly needs further investigation, though a provisional explanation may be found in evidence that translators are good at and enjoy problem-solving tasks, such as crosswords. IQ-type questions are of a similar nature, which may partly explain the difference in scores. It is moreover possible that the translator tends (more than the interpreter) to be a convergent thinker. IQ tests tend to correlate with 'convergence' (see e.g. Heim, 1970). It is also of course possible that translators really are more intelligent.

When the above results are compared with 16PF scores for a large sample of UK undergraduate students in arts and social sciences (Saville and Blinkhorn, 1976), again the most striking feature of the comparison is the high degree of overlap. The sample of translators are, it is true, seen to be more intelligent, somewhat more sober, apprehensive and self-sufficient than the students. The interpreters appear rather more assertive and imaginative than the undergraduates. Both groups, compared with the students, appear more conscientious, suspicious and tense. But the extent of the overlap is such that the two occupational profiles, of translators and interpreters, do not differ from the observed personality profile of British undergraduates to anything like the degree that might have been expected.

The extent of the overlap between translators and interpreters on the measure of introversion v. extraversion may be gauged from Figures 1 to 4. Figure 1 represents the distribution on a STEN ('standard ten') scale of the sample of UK undergraduates in arts and social sciences reported by Saville and Blinkhorn. Their scores are here converted to a scale ranging from 1 (extreme introversion) to 10 (extreme extraversion), with the mean set at 5.5 and the standard deviation at (plus or minus) two 'stens', i.e. the great

majority score between 4 and 7. This middle band of subjects is represented by the shaded area and acounts for some two-thirds of the population, with relatively small minorities, about 16% in each case, scoring low (1 to 3) or high (8 to 10).

When the scores for the sample groups of translators (Ts) and interpreters (Is) are converted to the same standardised scale, one might expect the difference between them to appear as in Figure 2, with Ts on the left (introversion) and Is on the right (extraversion). The extent of deviation from the mean shown in Figure 2 is somewhat arbitrary - from the stereotypes we can simply expect the Ts to be 'more introvert' and the Is 'more extravert' - but deviations of the magnitude shown are reported, in Cattell et al (1970), for numerous occupational groups on several personality traits.

The observed difference is shown in Figure 3, for the 65 Ts and 35 Is sampled. This figure, which like the others is drawn to scale, clearly shows substantial overlapping. The difference observed is statistically significant only at the 6% level. It is thus a good illustration of the dangers of supposing that statistical significance also means substantive significance. There would for instance be little to be gained from observing an individual subject's score (unless it were extreme) on this scale alone if one wished to predict his future career or even advise him. (More complex statistical methods, in particular discriminant analysis, which takes into account all sixteen personality factors, do however, have some predictive power.)

Finally, Figure 4 displays the overlap by superimposing Fig. 3 (the Ts and Is as observed) upon Fig. 1 (the undergraduates).

Greater differences would no doubt be observed if the comparison were made with reference to other norm groups, eg. the general adult population. The Ts and Is are all professionals, of graduate or comparable status; and of course both groups are linguists.

Two conclusions which arise from these results are worth noting here. Firstly, it is sometimes asserted that interpreting is such a specialised language activity, requiring an unusual type of person, that it is unreasonable to expect undergraduate language students to tackle it, or alternatively that it should be confined to the privileged few, in the form for instance of a final year option. While the findings of this piece of research do not of course refute the assertion (no amount of statistics can ultimately prove a case, but merely strengthen the evidence for it) they certainly fail to support it and indeed give grounds for doubting it, in so far as it is based on personality. A second conclusion is that we may need to revise our view of the interpreter (and the translator) - what I have described as the stereotypes - at least in respect of their supposed personality characteristics. These conclusions presuppose that my samples of subjects were typical of their professions (a contention which I have not the space to argue here, though the whole research design was directed to that end); and that the 16PF is indeed capable of measuring personality (for which claim there is an enormous mass of published evidence by many people over many years, documented in e.g. Cattell et al. (1970)).

However, even if it were true that the two activities of translating and interpreting are so very different as to require inter alia a different temperamental disposition or personality (though the evidence fails to support this) there would still be a case for expecting students to taste both. The (stereotype) superficial extravert with the gift of the gab will benefit from being required to tackle the problems of translation, which need painstaking perseverance and a concern for accuracy. The (stereotype) introverted, thorough, deliberate, bookish individual will benefit from being required to concentrate very hard, respond quickly and spontaneously and communicate verbally.

As to the interplay of learning styles and teaching styles mentioned by Kline, I do not suggest that we should all subject ourselves to personality tests, though the experience can prove enlightening. I do however suggest, given the fair degree of overlap on most personality traits among the practitioners, that we - that is, academics with practical experience of translating and interpreting - can probably adapt our teaching of different skills, e.g. oral and written, to the appropriate learning style. Failing this, some of us in a language-teaching team will find one activity more congenial than the other, will thus teach it better and should therefore tend to specialise. There is a place for the multi-purpose language teacher and for the specialist.

Finally, I am mindful of the opinion expressed to me by the late Thadé Pilley, who believed - impressionistically, though with the authority of his fifty years of experience as a conference interpreter - that the interpreter possesses an unusual combination of characteristics: he is generally outgoing, socially at ease and eloquent, but also painstaking, perfectionist and capable of intense concentration. These are qualities which we should be only too happy to find, or to nurture and encourage, in our own students.

NOTES

1. The dramatist of the absurd, Arthur Adamov, describes in one of his prefaces his habit of eavesdropping, on buses and in the street, enabling him to collect 'des bribes de conversation dont le caractère décousu garantissait l'authenticité'.

2. As a brochure produced by AIIC (International Association of Conference Interpreters) puts it, 'pour être interprète, il faut être intelligent et connaître le monde'. (Necessary, though again hardly sufficient conditions.)

3. This survey is reported in detail in Henderson (1980).

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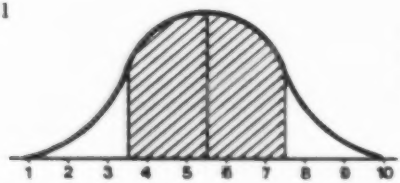
Figures 1-4

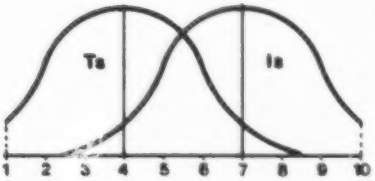
16PF higher-order factor Introversion (low scores) v Extraversion (high scores) in stens

Figure 1



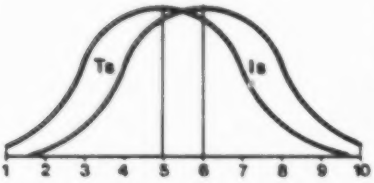
British undergraduates, arts and social sciences (N = 683) after Saville and Blinkhorn. Shaded area = 67% of total.

Figure 2



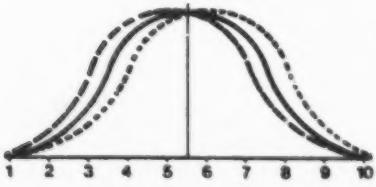
Hypothetical ("expected") distribution for 65 Translators and 35 Interpreters. Mean scores 4 and 7, ie - and + 0.75 s d.

Figure 3



Observed distribution for 65 Ts and 35 Is. Mean scores 5 and 6, ie - and + 0.25 s d (t-value 1.57; p 06).

Figure 4



Undergraduates ——————
Translators — — — —
Interpreters ·····